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Environment Department Takes Strong Enforcement Action to Protect New Mexico Water Quality

(Santa Fe, NM) — The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) today issued a compliance order to Mr. J.L. Sanchez for operating a sewerage system without a discharge permit. The system is located at Sadie's Trailer Court, Chamita, approximately eight miles north of Espanola in Rio Arriba County.

The sewerage system at Sadie's Trailer Court uses two septic tanks and a drainfield to dispose of domestic waste from the mobile home park. Sewage discharged from this system has surfaced on numerous occasions as a result of system failure, exposing residents to undue health risks.

"New Mexico's water quality and the health of our citizens are far too precious for us to allow them to be threatened by these sorts of shoddy operations," said NMED Water and Waste Management Division Director Charles Lundstrom. "Improperly installed, illegal and malfunctioning septic tanks are the biggest threat to our ground water resources. I hope that this action shows that NMED is serious about tackling this problem."

Discharges from Sadie's Trailer Court sewerage system contain high levels of ammonia nitrogen and organic nitrogen. These nitrogen compounds are readily transformed into nitrate at levels exceeding health-based ground water standards. Infants under four months of age who are fed water or formula mixed with water that contains excessive levels of nitrate can develop acute methemoglobinemia ("blue baby syndrome"). This condition reduces the blood's ability to transport oxygen, and can cause oxygen deprivation and central nervous system effects ranging from mild dizziness and lethargy to coma and convulsions.

The administrative compliance order requires that all septic tanks at Sadie's Trailer Court be pumped to reduce wastewater levels in the septic tanks; all contaminated areas where sewage has surfaced be disinfected and fenced to prevent access; and the cause of the surfacing sewage be determined and interim measures be implemented to prevent sewage from surfacing. A civil penalty of \$261,577 is also assessed. Furthermore, the order requires J.L. Sanchez to complete a Discharge Permit Application and submit the Application to NMED for review.

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9/9/04

Page 2

NMED's order finds that Mr. Sanchez violated New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission (WQCC) Regulations by neglecting to notify NMED of the surfacing sewage and failing to take appropriate corrective actions. WQCC Regulations have also been continuously violated since at least June 1998 by Mr. Sanchez' failure to obtain a Discharge Permit from NMED for the discharge of effluent from the sewerage system.

Mr. Sanchez has a right to challenge the compliance order through a public hearing before NMED or request a settlement conference.

For further information, contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, at (505) 827-0314.

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